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ABSTRACT

This conference paper consists of a sketch of the British Open University at work as well as a brief commentary on current developments in the fields of communication technology, course design, instruction, and current trends in distance education. Provided first are statistics pertaining to current enrollment and enrollment projections, student body composition, staff size, and the extent of services provided by the University. Such issues as the relative feasibility of various audio, video, and telecommunications equipment; modification of correspondence units; and the effect of distance teaching on the nature of knowledge are covered. Described next are four new courses offered by the Open University and collaboration efforts between the Open University and outside agencies. Four trends in distance education are mentioned: the boom in distance education; the trends to apply distance teaching to a curriculum derived from the disciplines first and then move to a curriculum derived from the broad field of adult concerns; the trend in communications technology towards more individualized teaching; and the trend towards specialization in distance education. (MN)

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"International Dimensions of Distance Education"

A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE BRITISH OPEN UNIVERSITY

DR. MICHAEL G. MOORE

The starting point and the focus for a discussion of a field as wide as "international dimensions of distance education" is certain to be arbitrary; should we begin with a definition and a theoretical analysis - perhaps beginning with a consideration of the Individual Transactional Mode as defined by Boyd and Apps in the new A.E.A. Handbook? (1). Perhaps an historical approach would be more suitable, beginning with home study in the Chautauqua movement, taking in William Rainey Harper and correspondence instruction at the University of Chicago, including William Lighty and educational radio at Wisconsin, and ending with the experiments at the Universities of Nottingham in England and Wisconsin and elsewhere in America which were forerunners and models for the Open University. (2). Or should we attempt a tour-de-force, a grand survey of the dozens of distance education institutions around the world, starting with Adelaide Australia and its proposed graduate diploma in distance teaching, taking in the decision made this month to set up an Open University of the Far East in Hong Kong, and ending with the new teachers' education programme in Zimbabwe? (3).

Like any good adult educator faced with such a problem, I tried to imagine my audience, and putting your interests before my own I decided that I may not take any of these approaches. Surely, I decided, what an audience of American adult educators will want to hear from me is some news about the British Open University and about developments there. So, while I hope I will not be too parochial, but on the contrary that I will be able to point to some problems and issues of universal concern in distance education, it is about the British Open University that I will be speaking for the next ten minutes of so.

First of all I would like to give you a picture of the Open University system at work, after which I will mention one or two current developments in the fields of communication technology, course design and instruction. I will then describe what I think is the most exciting of our current activities, which is the development of a programme of non-credit Continuing Education, and in conclusion I will make a few comments about distance education in general.

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The Open University System

This is the end of the Open University's academic year, and it is examination time; some 70,000 adult students are taking days off work, and in other ways making themselves free to attend one of the several hundred examination centres set up in colleges, schools and public buildings throughout the country, and indeed throughout the world - even in California for example there are examination centres in Bakersfield, Fullerton, Riverside, Berkeley and Redonda Beach.

We know a lot about these students. (4). Our Survey Research Department tells us, for example, that 21% are school teachers and 14% housewives, that 45% are women and 33% do not have what you would call a High School Leaving Diploma, and that more people take Open University courses for general knowledge (38%) than to gain a qualification (33%) or to help with their jobs (29%). We know that about 6,000 of these students will be awarded their degrees this year; bringing the total of Open University graduates to about 40,000, or one in 12 of all baccalaureate degrees

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awarded in Britain. This means that about 55% of registered students complete a degree, with the rate for women (59%) rather better than for men (52%). (5).

The 1982 teaching year will begin in February; there will be places for about half the 42,000 people who have applied, and following the principle of Openess these places will be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

To earn this degree the new student will have to accumulate six credits, which means taking six courses (or half course equivalents) from more than 120 on offer. For most people this means working for six years and studying for about 12 - 15 hours every week. In these hours the student gives his primary attention to the correspondence course units which are sent to him at regular intervals, reads various texts, watches television programmes and listens to the radio to programmes linked to the current course unit material, attends a Study Centre for face-to-face tuition, and writes an assignment which is graded and commented on by his tutor. For the 70,000 students the University hires 5,500 part-time tutors, provides 270 Study Centres, despatches 77,000 packages of teaching materials every week, and with the BBC presents 35 hours a week on television and 24 hours of radio broadcasting. It employs 213 full-time regional academic staff and they are responsible for recruiting, training and supervising part-time tutors and for overseeing the educational progress of all students. At the University's headquarters, 320 academics organised in six faculties prepare new courses and rewrite old ones; also there is the BBC studio, and the administrative offices, and the computer which is the heart of the administrative system. (6).

This audience will be interested to know that we are now beginning work on a course to be called "Education for Adults", to be offered for the first time in 1984. I will join the Educational Studies Faculty, and will write parts of the course as a member of the "course team". The team has already met several times; it consists of sixteen people including a professional librarian, a BBC television and a BBC radio producer, an administrative assistant, an educational technologist, and a consultant professor of adult education from another University. This will be a half credit course only, so we will write 16 units - i.e. a half year of student work, - and our preliminary discussions are to determine what will be in the course, who will be responsible for various topics, and how we will use our television, radio, travel, and consultancy resources.

Some Issues of Current Interest

I am the associate editor of our journal "Teaching At A Distance", a journal which aims to carry articles about the theory and practice of distance education, especially as practised in the Open University. (7). I am therefore well placed to see the ebb and flow of issues and concerns of colleagues throughout the University, part-time as well as full-time in the regions as well as at the Centre, and I have selected a few of the issues which have been raised recently:

(a) Should general broadcasting be replaced by audio and video cassettes? When the University began teaching in 1970 there were four courses and now there are more than 100, and on many of these courses there are only a few hundred students. The costs of video and audio tape, and recording and replay equipment has fallen, and the University will provide a tape loan service from the beginning of next year. Tapes are educationally superior to general broadcasting in at least two ways, - the duration of the material can be varied, and tapes can be stopped and replayed, so the educational purpose and the content can be quite different - much more important in fact. (8).

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(b) Will the University establish a national educational telephone network based on Wisconsin's model? For some years there has been half hearted use of telephone conference calls to link tutors with students in remote areas: for example I have been responsible for 200 students in the Channel Islands and their only contact with their tutors has been by telephone. The telephone lines used have been public lines, two wire lines, and the amplification system has been a common office desk top speaker. Only eight lines can be joined at once, and there is a great deal of noise. The University is therefore seeking funds for a £1 million project of "dedicated" four wire lines linking all 260 Study Centres, with the intention that telephone tutorials replace face-to-face tuition for low population courses. (9).

(c) Other telecommunications projects of interest are OPTEL, the University's view-data system which will permit the student access to the University's computer as well as the Post Office view data system (PRESTEL) and thus he will have access to a vast store of information selected via a keyboard in his home, transmitted on the telephone screen. CYCLOPS is a microprocessor based audio visual system which can be coupled to the telephone to turn the domestic television into an electronic blackboard. A light-sensitive pen turns it into a two way graphics channel to supplement the audio telephone channel. I will install one of these units in a Channel Island Study Centre early next month.

(d) Should we change the appearance of our correspondence units? Early plans for the Open University envisaged a small publishing programme of study guides for existing textbooks, but this was soon abandoned for both educational and for public relations reasons. It became policy that our courses had to look good as well as be good, and high quality print and design techniques have been used from the beginning. As populations on many courses fall there are commercial reasons for turning to new publishing technology such as using computerized photo-typesetting direct from authors' transcripts and printing on demand from storage tapes or floppy discs. (10). Should such a change occur it would be mainly for educational not commercial reasons: it is sometimes argued that our correspondence units are <u>too</u> thoroughly prepared and that there is a loss of immediacy, of topicality, and that their air of permanence leads academics to caution and conservatism in teaching via that medium. We have to consider if more temporary, cheaper materials might lead to more innovatory teaching or would they merely destroy the confidence students now put in their course units?

(e) Does Distance Teaching change the nature of knowledge? The term distance teaching has not found favour in North America as it has in Europe - the term came into English, I believe, from the German via the European Home Study Commission. The American term "Independent Study" is better not only because it directs attention to the behaviour of the learner rather than teacher, but also because it reminds us that the student who learns at a distance from his teacher must, as a result of their separation, take on a degree of responsibility for his study. Compared with many other distance education, or independent study systems, the Open University give the student very little learner autonomy. While he may chose from a wide range of courses, after choosing he must follow the exact

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sequence of course materials and broadcasts, and may omit little of the course content in writing his assignments, since these are graded for "continuous assessment" and contribute to his final grade. Tutors who mark assignments are provided with marking guides and their work is closely monitored. Thus, while the University's first objective, the maintenance of high academic standards, is maintained by standardisation and "quality control" techniques, we are conscious that students can too easily acquire an idea of knowledge as passive, as unproblematic, not the subject of debate and controversy, but more like a commodity to be bought in a package. Articles in recent issues of Teaching At A Distance suggest that tutors are very concerned about the exaggerated respect given by students to course units and various suggestions are given for change, from reducing the print quality of the correspondence units, abandoning correspondence units altogether in favour of guided reading, to various ideas for more student activity, peer teaching, discovery learning, and, perhaps most popular, the opportunity for more student project work as an alternative to normal assignments. This is a problem, I suppose, in all education, but particularly in distance education. (11).

Continuing Education

Alone among British Universities, the Open University has a public service responsibility, formally assigned in its Charter. It says that as well as research, undergraduate and graduate teaching, the University has a responsibility "to promote the educational well being of the community generally". (12). Having given first attention to the establishment of the undergraduate programme, the University is now building a nationwide programme of non-credit adult education courses aimed at a wide range of social, professional, vocational and personal needs. Courses have already been prepared or are in progress:

- in the field of health and social welfare, e.g. "The handicapped person in the community", "An ageing population", "Conflict in the Family", "Drug therapy".

- for industry, e.g. "The effective manager"; "Accounting for managers", "Microprocessors and product design: a course for engineers", "Microprocessors and product development: a course for industry".

- for school teachers "Mathematics across the curriculum", "Education for family life", "Language use in the classroom".

- and in Community Education "The first years of life", "The pre-school child", "Childhood 5 - 10", "Energy in the home", "Consumer decisions" "Planning retirement".

These course are roughly of two kinds; some concentrate on the problems and concerns of adults in their every day lives - as parents, consumers and citizens, while others contribute to professional continuing education. They are usually of shorter duration than undergraduate courses, and a greater variety of presentation techniques are used. Most have a broadcasting component, but there has been great demand for "learning packages" which can be worked through independent of the University and free of the pacing which is provided in undergraduate courses. This has led to the Centre for Continuing Education adopting the position of a resource centre, - gathering materials outside as well as within the Open University, organising it into packages, and disseminating it nationally. Of particular interest in this respect is the course "Teaching strategies in Continuing Education", which will be a series of learning packages based on the best adult education training materials that are identified in a national search. On the same subject the University is collaborating

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with the Council of Europe also, to produce a series of films about teaching adults, and these will be used in a European project of in-service training of adult educators. I hope very much that in the near future it will be possible to collaborate in course design and dissemination with colleagues in institutions and agencies in America as well as in Europe.

Nearly all Open University Continuing Education courses are produced in collaboration with agencies outside the University. They play a vital part in needs identification and programme planning, they usually contribute to development costs, and they often have a local network which will organise discussion groups, self help groups, and other activities for participants. Collaborators include government departments - Education, Industry, Health and Social Services, - consumer groups, associations of the retired and elderly, women's groups, parents' groups etc. First contacts between such groups and the University is usually at the national level, but as courses have been set up there is contact between the University's regional staff and local groups. A very important result of this has been the attempt by University staff to co-ordinate various local providers of adult education into local educational brokering services. These are still ad-hoc arrangements and coverage is patchy, but an awareness is growing of the need of distance teaching of continuing education to be supplemented by local face-to-face counselling and information services. (13).

Perhaps the most important development of recent months in distance education in Britain has been the Government's suggestion that an Open Technical College is set up for the vocational training of technicians, supervisors and junior managers in industry. This would be a £10 million a year programme with learner-system interface at technical colleges and perhaps in work places. The Open University has indicated its readiness to be involved in this activity, though in what ways is not yet decided, nor indeed is it certain that the Open Technical College will be set up at all.

In Conclusion, some Trends

I said at the beginning that I hoped my account of events in Britain would illustrate some possibilities, and some problems of international interest. I will conclude by pointing to four trends which I believe to be of such general importance:

First : distance education is a boom industry! Each year more countries, especially poor countries, are discovering social and economic advantages as well as educational advantages in distance teaching. The numbers of institutions will increase, the number of students will increase.

Second : there is a trend to apply distance teaching to a curriculum derived from the disciplines first - for example in undergraduate teaching - but to move then to professional and vocational training, and then to a curriculum derived from the broad field of adult concerns.

Third : there is a trend in communications technology towards more individualised teaching; this will become accelerated as computer based telecommunications systems become widely available, and cheap. International collaboration should increase with the wider availability of satellite technology.

Fourth : there is a trend towards specialisation in distance education. In the Open University for example the proportion of staff with experience of general adult education as well as distance education is falling. Training in distance teaching is now given in several countries, and

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study of the theory, literature and research is now available in a few university courses.

Finally : In these trends there is a danger. There is a danger that distance education becomes even further separated from the wider world of adult education, and that the learner centred philosophy of adult education is overwhelmed by a system which values efficiency and control over individual choice. Distance teaching needs the humanistic influence of traditional adult education even more than adult education needs the efficiency of distance education. Especially at the interface with the learner, there is a vital need for face-to-face contact with educators who are dedicated to helping the learner decide what he wants to learn, to help him select and adapt distance learning materials for his own purpose, and to maintain control of the educational relationship. What will be vitally important in the next few years is that we help distance educators to be more understanding about what ought not, and cannot be done at a distance, and that educators in other fields become more knowledgeable and involved in using distance education to achieve their own goals.

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(5) A good summary of the level and nature of demand for the Open University, student progress through the University and graduation patterns is given in:

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(6) An Introduction to the Open University, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes.

(7) Teaching At A Distance is published twice yearly and is available on subscription from Open University Enterprises Limited, 12 Cofferidge Close, Stony Stratford, Milton Keynes. MK11 1BY. United Kingdom. Enquiries may be addressed to the author.

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